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RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN 7456
RUEH DU/AMCONSUL DURBAN 1520
RUEHJO/AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG 9811

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED
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SUBJECT: DEATH OF FORMER HEALTH MINISTER SHOWS HOW FAR SOUTH AFRICA
HAS MOVED FROM FORMER AIDS DENIALIST POLICIES

11. (SBU) Summary: Former Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang died on December 16 from complications arising from a 2007 liver transplant surgery. Having served as Health Minister from 1999 until September 2008, Tshabalala-Msimang was the most outspoken proponent of the Mbeki government's controversial health policies regarding HIV/AIDS. Many South Africans paid tribute to Tshabalala-Msimang as a loyal ANC stalwart, but none have defended her performance as spokesperson for the era of AIDS denialism in South Africa. End summary.

12. (SBU) When Tshabalala-Msimang took office in 1999, many in the health sector were optimistic because of her work in the National Progressive Primary Health Care Network (NPPHCN), her diplomatic skills, and strong relationships with pharmaceutical companies. She was also a longstanding ally of new President Thabo Mbeki. Once in office, however, she quickly became embroiled in championing President Mbeki's views denying any link between HIV and AIDS, and attributing the disease to nutritional deficiencies.

13. (SBU) For years Tshabalala-Msimang believed and argued to South African citizens that using beetroot, garlic, and African potatoes as nutritional supplements would help fight the disease. She repeatedly blocked or delayed distribution of ARV drugs, labeling them poisonous and toxic. (Note: In 2003, she fought and won an application in the Constitutional Court to prevent the rollout of Nevirapine to pregnant mother for the prevention of mother-to-child AIDS transmission. End Note.)

14. (SBU) Meanwhile, former President Mbeki continues to deny that thousands of South Africans died due to the previous government's AIDS policy. Addressing the media following the former Health Minister's death, his spokesperson Mukoni Ratshitanga told reporters that the previous government did not deny anyone ARV drugs. He reported that anti-retroviral drugs have always been part of the public health system and that people had access to them. Ratshitanga said the health department, with the guidance of Tshabalala-Msimang, followed a "holistic approach" to fight HIV/Aids and does not regret its decision. When asked how Mbeki was taking the criticism about the previous government policy on AIDS, Ratshitanga reported that "Mbeki is fine with it as he and the late former minister never said that HIV does not cause AIDS."

15. (SBU) Comment: The most interesting aspect surrounding Tshabalala-Msimang's death is that, while many spoke of her service in the struggle against apartheid, no one, not even Mbeki, attempted to defend her advocacy of AIDS denialist policies. In just over a year, Tshabalala-Msimang's stance on HIV/AIDS has gone from being the prevailing SAG policy to being one that no one is even willing to acknowledge publicly. Mbeki himself is now denying that he was ever an "AIDS denialist." End Comment.